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ABSTRACT

Art has played a part in the helping professions since ancient times. In recent times, there has been renewed interest in the use of the arts in counseling, especially art forms that are considered "expressive." Counselors can help their clients develop their potential through concrete and abstract verbal and nonverbal art forms. To do so, it is important for counselors to understand the arts and how they can be useful in counseling. The expressive arts consist of verbal and nonverbal ways of representing feelings. The most well known verbal arts are drama and literature, while the best known nonverbal arts are music, dance, imagery, and visual expression (drawing, painting, sculpting). While there are numerous ways to use the expressive arts in counseling, the needs of the client, the skills of the counselor, and the nature of the problem must be main considerations when using the arts therapeutically. Expressive arts can be used on primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of prevention in all forms of counseling. Counselors must be aware of the limitations as well as the strengths of using the expressive arts in counseling. (NB)

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON Counseling And Personnel Services

CAPS DIGEST

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The Expressive Arts in Counseling

Samuel T. Gladding

Overview

Art has played a part in the helping professions since ancient times (Fleshman & Fryrear, 1981). As early as 500 BC, the Egyptians utilized concerts and dance in the treatment of the mentally ill. Likewise, the Greeks used drama as a way of assisting the disturbed in purging their repressed emotions. The Hebrews relied on music, and other arts, in restoring and promoting mental health too, the most famous example being David who played his harp to soothe a distraught King Saul. Literature was seen by the Romans as a specific way of helping too. Lucretius thought poetry could disperse the "terrors of the soul" (Coughlin, 1990, p. A6).

In recent times, there has been renewed interest in the use of the arts in counseling, especially art forms that are considered "expressive." Informed counselors can assist their clients in developing their potential through concrete and abstract verbal and nonverbal art forms that inspire, direct, and heal. Therefore, it is important that counselors know how the arts are used in helping. This type of background enables them to make informed decisions based on the type of treatment available. It can also give them more versatility in the services they provide.

What are the Expressive Arts?

The expressive arts consists of verbal and nonverbal ways of representing feelings. They allow individuals options in conveying their emotions. Expressive arts usually take the form of a unique creation, such as a song or painting. However, they may appear rather mundane as well. The common denominator they share is the utilization of silent insight and natural abilities. The most well known verbal arts are drama and literature, while the best known nonverbal arts are music, dance/movement, imagery, and visual expression (i.e., drawing, painting, or sculpting).

Generally, verbal and nonverbal arts complement each other and there is considerable integration of them in many artistic expressions. For example, the production of a play usually requires verbalization, directed movement, music, and visual effects such as scenery and costumes. Thus, the expressive arts may be utilized by themselves or combined (Gladding, 1992).

How the Expressive Arts are Used in Counseling

Numerous ways exist to utilize the expressive arts in counseling. The needs of clients, the skills of counselors, and the nature of the problem(s) are the main considerations in employing them. Expressive arts are used on primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of prevention in all forms of counseling (Caplan, 1964).

The Arts in Counseling: Primary Prevention

Primary prevention focuses on modifying environments and teaching life skills so that individuals maintain or enhance their mental health. A major emphasis is on instruction. The expressive arts are excellent tools to use in teaching. They are usually innately interesting to participants. Also, their attractiveness helps individuals remember lessons.

On an individual level the school is a natural setting for primary prevention to occur through the use of guidance. For young children, toys, puppets, and drama are effective in modeling and reinforcing appropriate prosocial behaviors (Irwin, 1987; James & Myer, 1987). Music is also a powerful medium for helping children remember guidance lessons. This is especially true if children have fun in the process (Bowman, 1987).

Drama and music may be helpful for adolescents and adults, too, but often individuals in these age groups are more attuned to the language arts (e.g., literature). For this population, specific stories that illustrate how choices are made in different life stages are appropriate (Lerner & Mahlendorf, 1992).

The Arts in Counseling: Secondary Prevention

Secondary prevention is the process of working with specific high risk individuals or groups to forestall or reduce problems due to psychological crises. The focus is on minimizing dysfunctionality.

The expressive arts can be utilized for children, adolescents, and adults. For example, these individuals can soften their pain and make their feelings more concrete and understandable through painting/drawing, writing, playing music, or displaying

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body movements. Often persons who are worked with on this level express themselves best through engaging in semi-structured, open-ended artistic exercises, e.g., drawing, or decorating (Adelman 1988).

The Arts in Counseling: Tertiary Prevention

Tertiary prevention is aimed at reducing the impairment that occurs as a result of psychological disorders. This type of intervention is what most people consider "counseling." On this level the concentration is on healing and wholeness.

The expressive arts come into play at this time through the relief and concreteness they provide clients. For example, persons on almost all levels can keep a journal of their feelings or find and discuss with their counselor photographs of life experiences. Thus, emotions are released in a way that leaves a reminder. An inspirational example of the use of art on a self-help basis for the treatment of depression is the story of Elizabeth "Grandma" Layton, an 82-year old grandmother from Kansas who used the contour method of drawing portraits of herself to overcome depression and start enjoying life at age 68 (DeAngelis, 1992).

Using the Expressive Arts in Counseling—Strengths and Limitations

There are many reasons to employ the expressive arts in counseling and some cautions to take. Among the major strengths of the expressive arts in counseling are:

1. The arts help clients create and improve their self-concepts.
2. The arts enrich the lives of clients and counselors and help them see new facets of the world they may have previously missed. This new or renewed view of life is often energizing.
3. The arts help clients focus on what is troubling them andto gain direction. Through verbal and nonverbal means the dynamics underlying old problems become clearer and insight grows.
4. The arts are a natural way of conveying feelings and are socially acceptable. Emotions that are released through artistic expression are often therapeutic on many levels.
5. The arts promote flexibility and change. Clients who use the arts learn to stay open to new possibilities in their lives.

The limitations of using the arts in counseling are tied to the persons and processes involved.

- One drawback to using the arts is that some individuals resist doing anything that is creative because they fear that artistic expression is only for the very disturbed.
- A second limitation of using the arts is the ineffectiveness of them for persons who work as artists, who are concrete thinkers, or who are mentally disturbed. In such cases there is resistance and little insight is gained.
- A third limitation of using the arts is they may be misused by unskilled counselors.

Conclusion

The ancient wisdom of the past about the use of the arts and healing is being rediscovered. The expressive arts in counseling are becoming better known and more utilized. They are an effective way of helping many clients prevent and resolve problems. They are also a means of enriching the lives of all involved and making the change process in counseling more noticeable. Whether in the form of music, drawing, movement, writing, or acting, the arts play a vital role in counseling.

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